

A Survey of Expert Opinion on Potentially Negative
Uses of Psi, U.S. Government Interest in Psi, and
the Level of Research Funding of the Field

Charles T. Tart

University of California at Davis

Considerable concern has been expressed by some parapsychologists lately about the possible military uses of psi ability. This concern is partially based on assessments that the U.S.S.R. is not only conducting secret research on the development of military applications of psi, but that this military research is funded at high support levels such that significant progress on understanding and using psi is more likely in the U.S.S.R. than in the U.S.A. These kinds of concerns have been expressed in the recently declassified Defense Intelligence Agency document DST-1810S-387-75, "Soviet and Czechoslovakian Parapsychology Research."

Adequate assessment of this situation is difficult for several reasons. First, any estimate of what is happening with secret military research in the U.S.S.R. must involve considerable inference and conjecture. Second, there has been no collection of expert opinion in the U.S.A. as to whether psi can potentially be used for military purposes. Third, there has been little, if any factual data on the actual level of support of parapsychological research in the U.S.A.

This paper will report a survey of (1) expert opinion on the potential military uses of psi; (2) the degree to which the U.S. government has officially made inquiries about the field among experts in parapsychology; and (3) the level of funding of parapsychological research over the past five years. Hopefully this will provide some data relevant to these important questions.

Sampling Procedure:

Tart

-2-

Except for possible classified research on psi, it is relatively straightforward to identify the handful of individuals and research laboratories that have produced the bulk of experimental data on parapsychology in the last five years. Based on the membership list of the Parapsychological Association (PA), my knowledge of the literature, and my personal acquaintance with most of the workers in this field, in March of 1978 I sent questionnaires to individuals (the director or an outstanding individual scientist) at 14 identifiable parapsychological research laboratories in this country. My criteria for selection was that each individual had to be a full member of the PA who had been actively working and publishing in the field for the last five years. Each had to have at least one occasional colleague to qualify to represent a laboratory or center. In order to protect the confidentiality of my respondents, I shall not specify my selection criteria in any more detail, but I believe that an almost identical selection would be made by every knowledgeable parapsychologist. Thirteen of the fourteen questionnaires were completed and returned to me.

The questionnaire asked each respondent for his or her opinion on three potential military applications of psi, about official government visits to their laboratory, and about the average funding level of their laboratory over the past five years.

Results:

Question 1: "How strongly do you believe that psi abilities might potentially be used in the future in a practically useful way for espionage and military intelligence activities? Assume that very large amounts of money and scientific manpower would be used to study and develop these activities in making your estimate."

The response categories allowed for this and the following two questions were "Impossible," "Unlikely," "Possible," "Likely," and "Certain." No

respondent considered espionage use of psi impossible or unlikely. Four considered it possible, five likely, and the remaining four considered it certain.

Question 2: "How strongly do you believe that psi abilities might potentially be used in the future in a practically useful way by the military to physically harm, sicken, or kill individuals? Again assume enormous resources devoted to such development."

considered
No respondent " this impossible, two thought it unlikely, seven possible, three likely, and one certain.

Question 3: "How strongly do you believe that psi abilities might potentially be used in the future in a practically useful way by the military to physically interfere with the operation of physical equipment, such as computers, observation instruments, etc." Again assume enormous resources devoted to such development."

The distribution of answers to this question was almost identical to those of the second question. No respondent thought this impossible, one thought it unlikely, seven possible, four likely, and one certain.

There is a fairly general consensus of these experts, then, that several military applications of psi are possible or even likely if enough development research were carried out.

Question 4: "Have you or one of your laboratory staff been approached by agents or officials of the U.S. government, acting in an official capacity, in the last five years, in order to gather information on parapsychology for any government agency?"

The alternatives here were "Never," "Once," "Several Times," and "Frequently." The bulk (8) of the respondents had never been approached, one had been once, and four had been approached several times. None answered that they had been approached frequently. Thus the U.S. government has

Tart

-4-

gathered at least some information about the field from knowledgeable sources.

Funding Level: Because the question of funding in a chronically under-funded field can be emotionally sensitive, the questionnaires were returned to me in a manner that did not allow me to identify individual respondents. I asked the respondents to estimate their laboratory's average yearly budget (over the past five years) that had been available for research on psi. Teaching or service activities were not to be included in this estimate, nor was any dollar value to be put on volunteer help. Researchers who had a full-time salary but who could use only part of their time on psi research were to prorate their salary accordingly. I would guess that the funds available to these 13 respondents probably represent at least 80-90% of all the funds available for scientific parapsychological research. Thus the figures below should be close estimates of actual dollars that have been available for research.

The total funds available per year for the entire group of respondents was \$552,000. The distribution of these funds was quite uneven: individual yearly laboratory budgets ranged from no funds at all to \$150,000. While the mean level of yearly funding was \$42,500, the median level was \$17,000. That is, half the active research laboratories in the U.S.A. had yearly research budgets of less than \$17,000.

As a comparison, a generally accepted figure for yearly support of a single research scientist in industrial settings is \$75,000. By this standard, the total yearly budget for scientific parapsychological research in the U.S.A. is sufficient to adequately support seven and three-tenths scientists.

It is of some interest to look at the relationships between funding level, frequency of government visits, and assessment of military potentials of psi. I computed a total military potential score for each respondent by assigning 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4 points for "Impossible" to "Certain" responses to the three

Tart

-5-

questions about potential military applications of psi. A respondent who thought all three applications were certain, e.g., would receive a military score of 12, while one who thought they were all impossible would receive a score of zero. I assigned numerical values of 0, 1, 3, and 6 to the "Never," "Once," and "Several Times," response categories about government visits. As the "Frequently" category was not used, it was not assigned a value.

Using this procedure, estimated military potential and yearly budget were not significantly correlated ($r = -.20$), nor were military potential and frequency of government visits ($r = -.33$). Frequency of government visits and yearly budget level were suggestively ($p < .10$, 2-tailed) correlated ($r = +.51$). This probably reflects the fact that larger laboratories are more visible.

Discussion:

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it is difficult to accurately assess the extent of U.S.S.R.'s research effort in developing military applications of parapsychology. The expert scientists sampled here, however, generally agree that at least some military applications may be possible or likely, especially the use of psi for espionage purposes.

I had originally planned to compare the parapsychology research budget with other fields of science, but the total amount is so low for any field of science that this would be fruitless. Many large corporations undoubtedly have higher budgets for researching more attractive packages for facial tissues.

As to possible discrepancy in the size of research efforts in the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A., the budget data revealed in this survey indicate it would take but a tiny fraction of national resources for the U.S.S.R. to overshadow U.S. research activity by one or two orders of magnitude.